

A Star-Spangled Groundbreaking



The sun shown through the large 30 x 42-foot Star-Spangled Banner flag as it floated overhead on April 27 as key elected officials, NPS leaders, architects and construction contractors, poised, shovel ready, to break ground for a new visitor center at Fort McHenry National Monument and Historic Shrine. “This new center has been needed for so long, and we are thrilled that we’ll have a beautiful new facility for orienting visitors and students and helping them to understand the remarkable resources of Fort McHenry” said Superintendent, Gay Vietzke to a crowd of 300. A moment later, the shovels sank into the soft earth amid thunderous cannon salutes and cheers. A spirited rendition of “Yankee Doodle,” played on the fife and drum, was heard above the applause, as smoke drifted across the audience from the big gun.

The groundbreaking ceremony represented a culmination of longstanding partnerships between the NPS, the Maryland Congressional Delegation, the State of Maryland, City of Baltimore and the Friends of Fort McHenry. “Like the defense of the fort in 1814, the city, state, federal government, and people of diverse backgrounds came together to make this happen” said Maryland Governor Martin O’Malley. In 2005 Congress appropriated \$11,060,000 in federal transportation funding to support construction of a new facility at the park. The City of Baltimore and State of Maryland supported the project by committing matching funds both in excess of \$1,450,000. Retired U.S. Senator Paul Sarbanes, who led initial efforts to secure funding, summed up the need succinctly: “The original visitor center, built in 1966, was built to accommodate 250,000 visitors a year. Now the park receives over 600,000 visitors annually and I expect that number to go over a million very soon.”

“In addition to being larger and capable of handling more visitors, the new building will have better exhibits that are more relevant to a younger audience” says Superintendent Vietzke. To do that, the new exhibits will show how the events of 1814 relate to people today. An engaging audiovisual presentation will feature multiple screens, computer graphics and high tech audio. The exhibits themselves will be interactive with computer stations, reproduction artifacts kids can touch and even a station where visitors can choose which version of the National Anthem they would like to hear.

Even the outer façade of the building will be interpretive. Designed by GWWO Architects, Inc., of Baltimore, the building will be comprised of two sweeping elements – one of strong red brick like the fort and the red stripe in the Star-Spangled Banner, the other of polished metal symbolizing the white stripe. “While red, white and blue will still be our favorite colors, the new facility will also be green in the environmental sense of the word” says Superintendent Vietzke. The new building is designed to achieve at least silver-level LEED (Leadership in Energy Environmental Design) certification.

Forrester Construction Company of Rockville, MD has been awarded the contract to construct the building. The 18-month contract will have the new facility ready to commemorate the Bicentennial of the War of 1812 and is scheduled to open in the fall of 2010. “This is an important building and Fort McHenry will be the center of the Star-Spangled Banner National Historic Trail,” said U.S. Representative John Sarbanes.